

## On the knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*

**Critic:** Thomas De Quincey

**Source:** *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, edited by David Masson, A. & C. Block, 1897, pp. 389-94. Reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 3

**Criticism about:** William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

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[De Quincey, a Romantic essayist, critic, and author of *Confessions of an English Eater*, contributed to Shakespearean criticism with his famous essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," first published in 1823. In the excerpt below, De Quincey explains the profound effect of the knocking heard in *Macbeth* following Duncan's murder. He notes that the killing of Duncan suspends "the world of the ordinary life" and allows the "entrance of the fiendish Heart" and a "world of darkness." The knocking, De Quincey proposes, represents a reaction to this dark world and indicates that "the human has made its reflux on the fiendish." Finally, he states that it reestablishes the workings of an ordinary world and "makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them."]

From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this:--The knocking at the gate which succeeds to the murder of Duncan produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was that it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavoured with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see *why* it should produce such an effect. (p. 389)

My understanding could furnish no reason why the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* should produce any effect, direct or reflected. In fact, my understanding said positively that it could *not* produce any effect. But I knew better; I felt that it did; and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it. ... At length I solved it to my own satisfaction; and my solution is this:--Murder, in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason,--that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life: an instinct which, as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures. This instinct, therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of "the poor beetle that we tread on," exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer. Our sympathy must be with *him* (of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them,--not a sympathy of pity or approbation). In the murdered person, all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic; the fear of instant death smites him "with its petrific mace." But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion, --jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred,--which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.

In *Macbeth*, for the sake of gratifying his own enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakspeare has introduced two murderers: and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated: but,--though in *Macbeth* the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her,--yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and, on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, "the gracious Duncan," and adequately to expound "the deep damnation of his taking off," this was to be expressed with peculiar energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature,--*i.e.* the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man, --was gone, vanished, extinct, and that the fiendish nature had taken its place. And, as this effect is marvellously accomplished in the *dialogues* and *soliloquies* themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration; and it is to this that I know solicit the reader's attention. If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle is *that* in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life. Or, if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and, chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets, and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man,--if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now, apply this to the case in *Macbeth*. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed"; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be insulated--cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs--locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested, laid asleep, tranced, racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated, relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. (pp. 390-93)

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**Source Database:** Literature Resource Center

## Thomas De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*"

1. Does the author find the effect of the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* comical, haunting, disgusting, or inappropriate? What words or ideas lead you to this conclusion? Do you agree?

2. DeQuincey believes that when studying a great work of literature the most important task for the reader is to understand it. Do you think this is generally true or false? Do you agree with DeQuincey?

3. What does DeQuincey mean when he says, "But to return from this digression"?

4. According to DeQuincey, does Shakespeare intend to have his readers feel sympathy for the murder victim Duncan or with his murderers? Does this seem strange to you? Why does Shakespeare do this, in your opinion?

5. DeQuincey thinks Shakespeare is an average poet. Do you think this is generally true or false? What do you think?

6. Are the Macbeths your typical happy married couple? Why or why not, in your opinion? Why does DeQuincey call them "fiendish"? How are the Macbeths different from people you know? How are they the same?

7. What does DeQuincey mean when he says the knocking at the gate in "Macbeth" signifies that "a new world" steps in? When he talks about "the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart," what is he talking about? Explain in your own words.

8. Do you think the sound of gate-knocking in ancient European castles would be a spooky sound, or happy sound? Why do you think Shakespeare wrote the scene in such a way that the knocking sound is repeated again and again?

Explain how this might tie into our mythic images of the "Gates of Hell."

9. What do you think is DeQuincey's intention when he compares the rattling sound of a passing carriage at the funeral of "a great national idol" to the sound of gate-knocking in *Macbeth*? Why make this comparison? What is DeQuincey trying to say?

10. What does DeQuincey mean when he states that "The knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to heat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on in the world in which we live makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that has suspended them"?